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ABSTRACT

Discussion of oral communication between native and non-native speakers focuses on proficiency-related differences in interactions where the non-native speaker is experienced and those in which he is a novice. Research in oral proficiency development, discourse domains, and communication strategies is reviewed. It is argued that the ways in which oral proficiency is described in two of the most widely used testing instruments are unsatisfactory because: (1) the guidelines recommended by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) ignore the modularity of linguistic competence; and (2) the ACTFL and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) rating scales assume a linear monotonic increase in competence in all components of proficiency. It is proposed that oral proficiency is a function of discourse domain as much as of lexical and syntactic knowledge, and that some components of oral proficiency such as communications strategies develop in a highly non-linear fashion, as learners learn to adapt their limited linguistic resources to overcoming the difficulties they face in communication. Therefore, learners who become experts at interacting with native speakers do not simply have more of what novices lack; factors underlying their proficiency are different and interact in different ways. A 42-item bibliography is included. (MSE)

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EXPERT-NOVICE DIFFERENCES IN ORAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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Paper presented at the Colloquium on NNS Interactional Discourse

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This colloquium is evidence of the fact that the ways in which learners of a language talk with native speakers and with other learners is an important area of applied linguistic research. Nonnative interactional discourse is a fertile area for both descriptive empirical work and for SLA theory construction and hypothesis testing. In my contribution to the colloquium, I would like to examine what we know of the phenomenon of native-nonnative interactional discourse with a view to discovering what it can tell us about how second language learners learn. What I want to focus on, in other words, is the relationship between interactional discourse and second language proficiency. Having said that, however, I would like to make clear what I am not focusing on. In looking at the relationship between interactional discourse and proficiency, I will not be considering the question of *how learners learn through* interaction. I believe that this issue has been sufficiently addressed by extensive research in the two fields of input and interaction (see Pica, 1987; Young, 1988; Yule & Tarone, 1991 for reviews) and the relationship between spoken interaction and speech accommodation theory (see Beebe, 1988; Beebe & Giles, 1984; Beebe & Zuengler, 1983). Much of this research has been carried out by participants in this colloquium.

The question that I wish to address is a fairly simple one. And it is, "What differences exist between those native-nonnative interactions in which the NNS is a novice at interacting in the second language and those interactions in which the NNS is an

experienced interactor?" I plan to examine a couple of answers to that question which have been given in the language testing and language teaching community and to show that both of those answers are essentially unsatisfactory because they are based on mistaken intuitions about learners' interactional styles and an oversimplified theory of second language proficiency. I will then make another attempt to answer the question by examining the research literature on native-nonnative interactions to see what can be gleaned about proficiency-related differences in interactional style from empirical studies of NNS discourse. These studies show, I believe, that oral proficiency in a second language is a multidimensional construct and that any description of oral proficiency needs to treat proficiency as an architecture of inter-related components rather than as a unitary construct. The architectural view of oral second language proficiency has important theoretical implications for theories of second language learning (cf. Young & Perkins, 1992) as well as yielding valuable insights into ways of assessing oral proficiency.

Developmental Views of Oral Proficiency

On the surface at least, the question of what proficiency-related differences exist in native-nonnative interactional discourse seems to be one that has already been answered to the satisfaction of a large number of individuals, notably those who subscribe to the so-called "proficiency movement" in language teaching. The Proficiency Guidelines published by The American

Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 1986), give fairly extensive definitions of what is meant by speaking proficiency at nine different stages from "Novice-Low" through "Superior." Two of these stages are reproduced on the handout. These guidelines have, however, been the subject of criticism by language testers and second language acquisition researchers alike (Bachman, 1990; Bachman & Savignon, 1986; Barnwell, 1989; Lantolf & Frawley, 1985, 1988). These critics point out several defects in the Guidelines. First, the ACTFL Guidelines assume that proficiency in any skill is a unitary construct; second, the Guidelines were not based on any empirical research on second language learners' linguistic performance; third, they have not been validated against the proficiency judgments of naive native speakers; and last, the Guidelines deal only cursorily with interactional discourse.

It is fairly easy to demonstrate one of the problems of the unitary approach to oral proficiency taken by the authors of the Guidelines. The two descriptions on the handout are of learners at the Novice-High and Intermediate-High levels and attempt to characterize learners' proficiency in a number of different areas. The first thing to notice is that the descriptions of each level contain several separate descriptions of different aspects of learner language at that level. So, at the Novice-High level, for example, learners' language is described in terms of syntax ("Can ask questions or make statements"), fluency ("signs of spontaneity and flexibility"), discourse features

("increase in utterance length ..."), morphology ("word endings are often omitted"), vocabulary ("vocabulary is limited"), and phonology ("Can differentiate most phonemes ..."). According to the view of proficiency which underlies the ACTFL Guidelines, as learners increase in proficiency, so each component of their interlanguage develops in step with all the others components. Thus, if we compare learners at the Intermediate-High and Novice-High levels, according to the Guidelines, the Intermediate-High learners know more vocabulary:

N-h: "Vocabulary is limited to areas of immediate survival needs"
I-h: "Developing flexibility in a range of circumstances beyond immediate survival needs"

and have better pronunciation:

N-h "errors ... may severely inhibit communication even with persons used to dealing with foreigners"
I-h: "Articulation is comprehensible to native speakers used to dealing with foreigners"

The problem with such an approach to second language spoken proficiency is that different components of IL do not necessarily develop in step. For example, Beebe and Takahashi (1989) give a good illustration of how pragmatic competence may develop at a different rate from other interactional skills in English. Beebe

and Takahashi note that the pragmatic competence of advanced and relatively assimilated Japanese ESL speakers may not be at the same level as their competence in other areas. Specifically, advanced Japanese learners of English may seem to be more direct in disagreeing and in giving embarrassing information than Americans feel is appropriate, perhaps because in an attempt to converge with American interlocutors, they go to too far and end up by diverging from the patterns they perceive.

Such individual differences among learners cannot be handled by a proficiency system such as the ACTFL guidelines because the underlying assumption is that all aspects of speaking competence develop at the same rate. In the examples of vocabulary and pronunciation given above, how is one to assess a learner whose command of vocabulary fits the description at the Intermediate-High level but whose pronunciation fits the description at the Novice-High level? The problem is compounded when we consider that each description refers to at least six different components of a learners' competence and that, in principle, each component may be assessed independently of the others at a different level. The ACTFL Guidelines are thus an inadequate description of proficiency differences among learners since they ignore the modularity of the language learning process.

One solution to the lack of modularity inherent in the ACTFL approach is to develop different scales for different components of proficiency. This is the approach taken by the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES) in their rating

scales for the oral interview of the Cambridge Assessment of Spoken English (CASE) examination. UCLES raters use seven separate scales, entitled grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, organization, communication strategies and interaction, interlocutor support, and task achievement and five descriptors of proficiency for each scale. A letter score from *A* through *E* is awarded on each of the scales and the learner's final score is the total of grades obtained on each separate scale. As an example of this rating system, the UCLES CASE communication strategies and interaction scale is given on the handout.

This approach to the assessment of oral proficiency is an improvement on the ACTFL system since it recognizes the modularity of IL development, and deals much more explicitly with interactional discourse. However, the UCLES system is, like the ACTFL system, an introspective approach since it is not based on empirical research into second language learning, and is as yet unvalidated against the judgments of NSs. A more significant defect of the system is the fact that underlying the rating scale for each component is the implication that language learning involves a linear, monotonic increase in the variable under consideration. In the UCLES CASE communication strategies and interaction skills scale, for example, the descriptors are scaled on the following continuum:

A Initiates and maintains interaction; responds with ease to topic shifts.

B Intended meaning communicated in most contexts; initiates and maintains interaction.

C Communicates main ideas; uses repair strategies; difficulties in initiating.

D Main ideas communicated in limited contexts; repair strategies rarely used; initiation rare.

E Great difficulty in communicating; unable to use repair strategies.

(UCLES, 1991, p. 24)

Apart from the fact that "communication" is undefined in the UCLES scale, it is clear that the view underlying the scale is that, whatever communication is, you get better at it as you progress in your study of the language. The view that language learning involves linear monotonic increases in some variable--a one-directional vector if you like--is a common one and one that has some limited empirical support. For example, some vocabulary studies (Broeder, Extra, & van Hout, 1989; Broeder, Extra, van Hout, Strömqvist, & Voionmaa, 1988; Yorio, 1989) have described learners as gradually adding to their second language word-hoard, or store of conventionalized expressions. In addition, studies of learners' processing speed in second language comprehension tasks (Conrad, 1989; Griffiths, 1990) and one study of learners'

speech rate (Lennon, 1990) have also shown a fairly steady increase in these variables over the time in which learners are exposed to the second language.

However, the vector mode of learning appears to be the exception rather than the rule. A majority of longitudinal studies of interlanguage development have indicated instead that the interlanguage system goes through a period of restructuring, and reorganization. One result of such restructuring is that intermediate stages may be further from the target than either beginning or advanced stages--a pattern commonly referred to as U-shaped behavior. A pertinent example of this non-linear development in the field of interactional discourse is provided in an anecdote by Johanna Nichols (1988, p. 15).

> When I first traveled to the USSR, my classroom knowledge of Russian marked me as a foreigner, and interlocutors were uniformly supportive. When my fluency improved to the point that I was taken for a Baltic Soviet, expectations rose, support decreased, and communication became more difficult. This affected not only everyday communication but also scholarly interaction.

Nichols' anecdote illustrates that effective interactive communication involves not only the learner but also her NS interlocutors. NS interlocutors may be more tolerant of errors when the learner is at an intermediate stage than when she reaches an advanced stage of proficiency, making communication *less* effective at an advanced than at an intermediate level.

There are a number of SLA studies which have described the restructuring of IL knowledge which may occur as proficiency develops. Most of the studies have to do with the acquisition of syntax, including Huebner's (1985) description of the development of a definite-article-like form "da" in the English IL of his Hmong informant, and Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann's (1981) description of reorganization of knowledge in the acquisition of word order in German as a second language. Ard and Gass (1987) also report that intermediate and advanced learners differ in the processes underlying their judgments of grammaticality. Intermediate learners appear to judge the grammaticality of sentences in a syntactically uniform manner, while advanced learners judge sentences differently according to the lexical items which they contained. While restructuring phenomena have received most attention from SLA researchers working in the field of syntactic development, there is also evidence of restructuring in learners' interactional discourse competence. This evidence is to be found in studies of discourse domains and communication strategies, which will be reviewed in the next section of this paper.

It therefore seems, from this brief review of developmental approaches to proficiency that our intuitive views of proficiency in interactive discourse can lead to some false conclusions regarding the differences between novice and expert patterns of interaction in a second language. First, proficiency does not necessarily develop at an equal rate in all its components and it is more reasonable to assume that development is modular rather

than unitary. Second, proficiency does not necessarily develop in a linear fashion but may be subject to restructuring and reorganization. The rating scales which are part of widely used oral proficiency tests such as the ACTFL oral proficiency interview and UCLES FCE oral interview reflect such mistaken beliefs largely because they are based on the test designers' intuitions rather than on detailed study of NS-NNS interactional discourse. As I hope will become clear in the next section, when we do look into actual examples of NS-NNS interactional discourse learners' competence turns out to be a rather more complex construct than it appears intuitively.

The theoretical framework within which my own approach to oral proficiency will be developed is that put forward recently by researchers in the field of educational measurement (Snow, 1989, 1990; Mislevy, in press; Young & Perkins, 1992). The framework is described in a recent paper outlining new developments in educational measurement, in which Mislevy (in press) describes the multidimensionality of learners' competence. According to Mislevy, competence is:

> a complex constellation of facts and concepts, and the networks that interconnect them; of automatized procedures and conscious heuristics ...; of perspectives and strategies, and the management capabilities by which the learner focuses his efforts. (p. 13)

And a consequence of this multidimensionality is that:

> Increasing competence in a substantive area need not be reflected as uniformly increasing the chances of success on all tasks. Patterns of smooth increase may be observed for certain people on certain sets of tasks, in certain phases of development ... Discontinuous patterns of change begin to appear as the scope of tasks becomes broader, as the range of development becomes greater, and as the experience of [learners] becomes more diverse. (p. 16)

In the next section I will discuss evidence from studies of NS-NNS interactive discourse which show that proficiency-related differences in the competence of learners are multidimensional in the way described by Mislevy.

Evidence for Multidimensional Oral Proficiency

Evidence that interactional oral proficiency is a multidimensional construct can be found in two separate threads of SLA research: in theoretical and empirical research into discourse domains, and in studies of communication strategies.

NNS Participation. The amount of participation in interactional discourse is one way in which we might expect expert NNS interactors to differ from novices. In the UCLES FCE rating scale, for example, there is mention that learners at level D "rarely initiate," while learners at level A develop "initiate and maintain the interaction." Again, underlying the UCLES scale is the view that advanced learners initiate and participate more

in conversations than do novices and increasing participation is a result of increasing proficiency. However, such a neat correspondence between participation and proficiency is not born out by empirical research.

Several studies have shown that the nature of the content being discussed in NS-NNS interactions has a marked effect on learners' participation in the discourse and on their grammatical accuracy. Studies by Zuengler (1989), Zuengler and Bent (1991), and Woken and Swales (1989) have shown that when NNSs either possess greater expertise than NSs in the subject matter being discussed or when both participants are led by the experimenter to believe so, then NNS participation increases and NNSs initiate more new topics than NSs. In a study of discourse in UCLES FCE oral interviews, Young & Milanovic (in press) note that the subject matter of the interview had a significant effect on how long a given topic persisted throughout the interview. In addition, the emotional investment of NNSs in the subject matter under discussion has been shown to affect accuracy in IL by Eisenstein and Starbuck (1989). As suggested by Zuengler (1992), these disparate findings appear coherent when they are interpreted in the light of Selinker and Douglas's discourse domain model of IL performance (Selinker & Douglas, 1985; Douglas & Selinker, 1985). According to discourse domain theory, a learner's competence may be different in different content domains. A learner's grammatical accuracy and interactional style may vary according to the domain, or subject matter, of discussion. This clearly

has important implications for judging the learner's proficiency. It is possible that a learner at a generally low level of proficiency may appear to have considerable interactional competence when the topic of discussion is one which he appears to command. In contrast, a learner at a generally high level of proficiency may have low interactional competence in domains that he does not command. And increases in interactional competence may occur as a learners' knowledge of a domain increases, rather than as a result of a general increase in second language proficiency.

Communication Strategies. A second way in which we might expect expert and novice second language interactors to differ is in their use of communications strategies, those attempts by speakers and their interlocutors "to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared" (Tarone, 1981, p. 288). From the CASE rating scale, it appears that use of repair strategies increases from level E through level C. However, studies have shown that such a picture is oversimplified and that in fact the learner's use of communication strategies undergoes considerable restructuring and reorganization as proficiency increases.

Poulisse (1990) noted that there was indeed an inverse relationship between the number of compensatory strategies used and the proficiency level of Dutch subjects learning English as a foreign language. She suggests a fairly straightforward explanation of this fact, namely that low proficiency learners "encoun-

ter more lexical problems and therefore need to resort to compensatory strategies more often" (p. 145). However, she also noted that, on some tasks, high proficiency learners used different kinds of communication strategies from low proficiency learners. High proficiency learners tend to use more holistic conceptual strategies, typically involving semantic approximation by means of words or gestures. On the other hand, low proficiency learners tended to use more transfer-based strategies. Again, the explanation for these proficiency-related differences seems to be quite straightforward--"learners of a lower proficiency level do not have a sufficiently large L2 vocabulary at their disposal to come up with suitable approximations" (Poulisse, 1990, p. 145).

In another detailed examination of proficiency-related differences in the communication strategies of Persian learners of English, Paribakht (1985) also found that both the type of strategy used and the overall frequency of strategy use varied with learners' proficiency in ways similar to those established by Poulisse. However, both Paribakht (1985) and Bialystok (1990) note that strategic competence is not something which develops in a second language but is instead an ability which develops first in a child's acquisition of its first language. Thus both NSs and NNSs use communication strategies and the proficiency-related differences are not due to differing underlying competence but rather (a) different kinds of communication difficulty and (b) different linguistic resources with which to overcome those difficulties.

The proficiency-related difference in kind and number of strategies noted above were also observed in a recent study of strategic behavior by Japanese learners of English in FSI oral interviews by Yoshida (1991). Yoshida's study compared strategic use by learners at three proficiency levels: beginners, intermediate, and advanced. She found that intermediate-level learners strategy use differed significantly from *either* high *or* low proficiency learners. She found that intermediate learners use more reduction strategies than either beginners or advanced learners. Reduction strategies involve changing or abandoning communication goals. The reason for the greater use of this kind of strategy at the intermediate level, Yoshida suggests, is that intermediate learners begin to use more complex syntactic forms and this leads NS interlocutors to broach topics which the learners cannot handle. Since the learners cannot communicate effectively on such topics they are forced to abandon them. However, NS interlocutors do not attempt difficult topics with beginners since the NSs know that the learners will not be able to handle them. On the other hand, high-proficiency learners' control of greater linguistic resources enables them to deal with difficult topics by means of achievement strategies.

I think this review of proficiency-related differences in communication strategies suggests three things. First, strategic competence is independent of second language proficiency and is developed instead by children as they learn their first language. That is to say, second language learners' strategic competence is

unrelated to their proficiency level. Second, the kinds of challenges that learners at different proficiency levels face in interacting with NSs are very different. The choice of topic by NSs is influenced by their perceptions of their NNS interlocutors' proficiency level. And third, since learners at different proficiency levels control different syntactic and lexical resources, their strategies for the communication of meaning are also different at different levels. It appears very clear that strategic competence and the use of communication strategies do not follow the linear, monotonically increasing vector which underlies conventional rating scales. Learners do not become more strategically competent at higher proficiency levels. Rather, at each level of proficiency, learners' strategic competence allows them to allocate whatever linguistic resources they control in order to overcome communication difficulties.

Conclusions

I began this paper by asking the question "What differences exist between those native-nonnative interactions in which the NNS is a novice at interacting in the second language and those interactions in which the NNS is an experienced interactor?" I hope to have shown that the answers to that question which are based on intuition rather than research are mistaken. In particular, the ways in which differences in oral proficiency are described in two of the most widely used testing instruments are unsatisfacto-

ry because (a) the ACTFL Guidelines ignore the modularity of linguistic competence, and (b) the ACTFL and UCLES rating scales assume a linear monotonic increase in competence in all components of proficiency.

When we turn from speculation to examine the empirical studies of proficiency-related differences in oral proficiency, we see that oral proficiency is a function of discourse domain as much as it is a function of lexical and syntactic knowledge and that some components of oral proficiency such as communication strategies develop in a highly non-linear way, as learners learn to adapt their limited linguistic resources to overcoming the difficulties they face in communication.

These descriptions of how learners become experts at interacting with NSs reveal that experts do not simply have more of what novices lack but that the factors underlying their proficiency are different and interact in different ways. As Bialystok has put it,

> Language proficiency is not a single achievement marking some quantitative level of progress with language learning. Rather, it is the ability to apply specific processing skills to problems bearing identifiable cognitive demands. Proficiency in a domain, or in a task, is evident when the demands of the task are not in excess of the demands of the language learner. Thus language learners with a particular configuration of skill component development will in fact exhibit a range of proficiency with the language that is determined by the impact of the task demands on the processing abilities of the learner. (Bialystok, 1991, p. 75)

We need to do far more empirical spadework in order to describe and account for proficiency-related differences in interactional discourse. Such work may be more fruitful if, as Bialystok and Mislevy have suggested, we start from the premise that learners' competence involves a complex constellation of knowledge, skills, and the networks that interconnect them.

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AAAL 1992, Seattle
Colloquium on NNS Interactional Discourse

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Expert-Novice Differences in Oral Foreign Language Proficiency

1. Two of the nine levels of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking.

Novice-High:
Able to satisfy immediate needs using learned utterances. Can ask questions or make statements with reasonable accuracy only where this involves short memorized utterances or formulae. There is no real autonomy of expression, although there may be some emerging signs of spontaneity and flexibility. There is a slight increase in utterance length but frequent long pauses and repetition of interlocutor's words still occur. Most utterances are telegraphic and word endings are often omitted, confused or distorted. **Vocabulary is limited to areas of immediate survival needs.** *Can differentiate most phonemes when produced in isolation but when they are combined in words or groups of words, errors are frequent and, even with repetition, may severely inhibit communication even with persons used to dealing with such learners. Little development in stress and intonation is evident.*

Intermediate-High:
Able to satisfy most survival needs and limited social demands. Shows some spontaneity in language production but fluency is very uneven. Can initiate and sustain a general conversation but has little understanding of the social conventions of conversation. **Developing flexibility in a range of circumstances beyond immediate survival needs. Limited vocabulary range necessitates much hesitation and circumlocution.** The commoner tense forms occur but errors are frequent in formation and selection. Can use most question forms. While some word order is established, errors still occur in more complex patterns, Cannot sustain coherent structures in longer utterances or unfamiliar situations. Ability to describe and give precise information is limited. Aware of basic cohesive features such as pronouns and verb inflections, but many are unreliable, especially if less immediate in reference. Extended discourse is largely a series of short, discrete utterances. *Articulation is comprehensible to native speakers used to dealing with foreigners, and can combine most phonemes with reasonable comprehensibility, but still has difficulty in producing certain sounds, in certain positions, or in certain combinations, and speech will usually be labored.* Still has to repeat utterances frequently to be understood by the general public. Able to produce some narration in either past or future.

2. One example of the seven UCLES Cambridge Assessment of Spoken English marking scales: *Grammar, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, Organization, Communication Strategies and Interaction,* and *Interlocutor Support, and Task Acheivement.*

Scale 5 (Communication Strategies and Interaction)

A Initiates and maintains interaction; responds with ease to topic shifts.

B Intended meaning communicated in most contexts; initiates and maintains interaction.

C Communicates main ideas; uses repair strategies; difficulties in initiating.

D Main ideas communicated in limited contexts; repair strategies rarely used; initiation rare.

E Great difficulty in communicating; unable to use repair strategies.

(UCLES, 1991, p. 24)